

The Desert

Stories of Emerging Faith

By Dan Ward

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“Bunnies are, too, good,” said the wolf. “Bunnies can hop and they are very warm.”

- From *Barrington Bunny*
The Way Of The Wolf, by Martin Bell

*Dedicated to my family,
with whom I share this
joyful, wondrous journey.*



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The Break Master

Part I

The Break Master is coming, and that's a scary thing. You see, The Break Master breaks things. Actually, he breaks everything. That's what he does.

I am afraid he's going to break down my door when he arrives. He will surely break some windows. He will probably break a wall, or maybe all the walls. He will even break the floor.

As I said, the Break Master breaks everything.

He will break my car and my bike, and I will not be able to get away. He will break my stuff. Oh, my precious stuff. I hope he does not break my stuff, but he probably will. That is what he does – he breaks things.

Then, no doubt, he will break my legs. He will break my arms. He might break my eyes. He might break my guts and I won't be able to eat or drink anymore. My teeth will not be safe either, and I really hate that. I don't understand why he has to break my teeth, but I am pretty sure he does. I really don't want him to break my teeth.

There is nothing he can't break.

There is nothing he won't break.

He is the Break Master.

He will not stop there. He will break my certainty. He will break my confidence. He will break my heart, I know he will. Even my mind and my knowledge will not be safe from the Break Master. He will break those things too.

The Break Master is coming, and that's a scary thing. You see, The Break Master breaks things. Actually, he breaks everything.

That's what he does.

(to be continued)

The Desert

A True Story

Not long ago, in a place not far away, there was a desert. In that desert, there lived a group of people. This group was a special group, because once a week, sometimes more often, sometimes less, they would get together at a well in the middle of this very dry desert.

At the well they would talk and sing. They drank the water and enjoyed the shade. After a while, they would fill their canteens and continue their wanderings in the desert.

One day, a young man, a traveler, came to the well. He sang the songs and drank the water like everyone else, but to him, the songs sounded dead, and the water seemed flat, especially compared to the songs he had heard and the water he had drunk in his travels. This didn't feel right to the young man, and he left the well feeling troubled.

He wandered through the desert, and after a week, he returned, but it was the same.

“What can I do about this?” he asked himself. “Is there a way that I can add life to this well? I can't very well create sparkling water, but He who created all things created this well as a source of sparkling water. The people of the well have forgotten what water is supposed to be like. The younger ones might not even know!”

So, the traveler went to a quiet place in the desert where he could be alone, and he began to think. He thought and thought, and his thought was a prayer to the Creator.

“Oh Lord,” he prayed, “I have drunk living water, and I want to share it with the good people of the well. Show me how to do this. Tell me what to do.”

The Creator, in His Wisdom and Mercy, spoke one word, but one word was enough. The young man fell to his knees and praised the

Loving Creator. He spent the night contemplating the word, under the starry desert sky. In the morning, he knew what to do.

During his contemplation the night before, guided by his Creator, the young man had remembered that at one time, somewhere in his travels, he had had a shovel. He knew that if he could find the shovel again, or somehow get a new one, he could dig the well deeper. But he lived in a desert, where wood and metal were scarce, and shovels even more so.

He set off on a quest for his shovel. Weeks stretched into months, and at times, the young man despaired of ever finding anything. The Adversary tried to prevent the traveler from finding it, but the Creator prevailed and at the appointed time, he found his shovel.

Excited, he raced back to the well, making plans as he went. The young man realized he was only one person, and although he was young, he knew he couldn't dig forever. When the whole group was gathered again, the young man asked for help.

He said "Hey! Hey! I think there is more to this well than meets the eye. I think there's better water down there, just waiting for us. And I have a shovel. I'm going to dig. I'm going to find this living water. But I can't do it by myself. I need help. It'll be hard work, but it'll be worth it."

Some people volunteered to help, though none of them had shovels. One person had a rope and a bucket, which she said they could use to carry the sand out of the well and to carry water, eventually.

Many weeks passed. As the group came and went, the workers began to uncover signs of sparkling water. It was little signs at first, and the work was sometimes slow going, but the signs were there.

Eventually, the day came when the workers found the deep, clear, sparkling spring the young man had envisioned. They were tremendously happy, and they danced around and hugged everyone. The whole group showed up at the well later that day, and wondered why the small band of workers was so happy.

You see, although the sparkling, living water was there, some of the people of the well still couldn't see it. They were used to the dull taste of water, and didn't want anything different. They couldn't

find anything different because they weren't looking for anything different. The difference in the water was as much a product of their own expectations and efforts as it was a property of the water itself.

"Come and drink of this living water!" the workers called, while some people just turned away, muttering about strangeness and changes. Others seemed not to hear at all, as they drank the sparkling water which turned dull in their cups. But many did hear, and many did drink, and the songs and talks that day were full of life and love and praise for the Creator.

The young man was so filled with the living water that he couldn't stop smiling. There was more water than he had ever dreamed of finding, so much that people could actually swim in it.

But the story does not end here. The traveler realized his job was not finished; indeed, it had just begun. Now that the water was there, people had to be told about it and invited to drink. So he did invite them, and they came.

The number of people who knew about the water grew, and people were more filled with the Spirit of the Creator.

The traveler was grateful to the Creator, and the whole group gave glory to the Creator, who had blessed them so much. Life at the well was good, for a time. But somehow, some of them began to forget about the Creator, and instead glorified the shovel.

"The shovel is so good," they would say. "It brought us clear water."

"The shovel is good," the traveler replied, "But the Creator is the one who gave us the water."

Some of the others ignored him. They took the shovel to a new area and began to dig. There was no water in that area, only sparkly desert sand. These others began to call the sand "water," even though it did not quench thirst like water.

"It sparkles and can be poured," they insisted. "Our water is just as good as your water."

"It's not my water," the traveler protested, "It is the Creator's. Your 'water' is just sand." But the others did not seem to hear.

Then, one of them declared "The shovel is mine. It no longer belongs to you, Traveler. You cannot use it."

The Traveler didn't know what to do. As he was walking one day, lost in thought, he stumbled onto the group who had taken his shovel. They were using it to put sand into the well, because they said the sand was water!

"You must stop!" the Traveler cried. "Sand is not water! You're clogging up the well!"

"We *must* do nothing," they replied. "Sand is just as good as water. Didn't the Creator make sand too? And He made a lot more sand than water, so he must like it better. We think the sand belongs in the well."

"But it doesn't belong there! The shovel is for getting the sand *out!*"

"We can use the shovel for what ever we want, because it's ours." they said. Then, to the Traveler's surprise, they broke the shovel in half. The next day, they were gone, and the well was clogged with sand.

The Traveler wept as he saw what they had done. He sorrowfully called together those who still knew the difference between sand and water. They spent the night under the starry desert sky in prayer together, and continued praying when the sun rose.

For forty days and nights, under sun and moon, this small band of diggers prayed. The Creator heard, and He answered their faithful prayer. In the morning of the last day, the first rays of sunlight glinted off of twelve shiny new shovels.

"It's a miracle," they declared, as they began to dig again...

The Dessert

An Introduction To Brother Mustard

When they measured his faith, it was smaller than that of any other novice ever to enter the monastery of St. Barnabas, so they called him Brother Mustard Seed. But when they saw how much he loved to eat, they shortened his name to Brother Mustard.

It is not that he ate a lot – he was no glutton. He simply ate with zest, joy and thanksgiving. The funny thing is, he didn't like mustard, but the name stuck.

As the years went by, Brother Mustard's faith grew into a bush-sized faith, large enough for the birds of the air to make their nests in. This was a blessing for the entire community.

Brother Mustard would tell parables and stories to his fellow monks, using new images to convey ancient gospel truths. Pilgrims came from far and wide to listen to him speak.

One evening after supper, Brother Mustard taught the assembly, saying:

On a hot summer night, when the supper was ended, the Apostle whom Jesus loved said to Jesus, "Master, may we go out for ice cream? Behold, we each ate a good dinner. Even Matthew, who is a picky eater, has eaten his vegetables and his plate is clean."

"I tell you the truth, we shall get some ice cream this very night, because your plates are clean," Jesus replied, "but not all of your plates are clean." (For He knew Judas had hidden some broccoli in his napkin).

So He took the Twelve out for ice cream, for the weather was warm and the Apostles had pretty much behaved themselves all day long.

"How do I know they won't run out of my favorite flavor?" asked Thomas as they walked.

“I say to you, do not be anxious about what flavor of ice cream you shall eat,” Jesus answered, “Look at the birds of the air. They do not sew, neither do they reap nor churn cream and sugar and berries together at cold temperatures, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than many birds?”

And Thomas was content, for now.

“We should give the ice cream money to the poor,” said Judas. Now, he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it.

“The poor you will always have with you,” replied Jesus, “But you will not always have Me.”

“Shouldn’t we be fasting or something?” asked Andrew.

“While the bridegroom is with them, the attendants of the bridegroom do not fast, do they?” explained Jesus patiently. “So long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. I tell you, the time is coming when you will not eat ice cream, but tonight, you shall.”

When they arrived at Isaac’s Ice Cream Shoppe, Jesus turned to Simon, called Peter.

“Try the Neapolitan, Peter. It is quite good, and has three flavors together.”

“Surely not, Lord! For I have never eaten unclean ice cream,” Peter replied [for the temple leaders had forbidden the mixing of ice cream flavors, nor did they permit the chocolate and the strawberry to touch or intermingle.].

“Do not consider unclean what God has made clean,” Jesus answered with a grin. This happened three times, then Peter ordered two scoops of Neapolitan, which he enjoyed a great deal.

After paying for the dessert, Jesus saw a man with an ice cream headache, who had eaten his ice cream too fast.

“Was it because of his own sins or the sins of his parents that this man got an ice cream headache?” asked James.

“Neither. It was so that the works of God might be displayed in him,” said Jesus. Then He reached out His hand and touched the man. Instantly, the ice cream headache left him, and the crowd was amazed.

Some children came around, asking Jesus for ice cream, and the disciples rebuked them.

But Jesus called for the children and bought ice cream for them all, saying:

“Permit the children to come to Me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child receiving an ice cream cone shall not receive it at all.

And He taught them with this parable.

“The kingdom of God is like a child seeking an ice cream cone. Upon hearing the music from the ice cream man’s truck, he went and asked of his father for some money (for he had none of his own).

“His father did give the money, and also some for his little sister. The father also went with the child to stand by the side of the road, and did wave his arms at the driver so as to make him stop.

“For what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a cone, will give him a stone? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!

“I tell you the truth, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents and receives the ice cream of grace than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

And then Brother Mustard brought out a box of ice cream sandwiches, which he shared with everyone.

Credo

I believe I believe in God.
I hope I believe in God.
I believe in hope.

I believe I believe in grace.
I hope I believe in grace.
And if I don't believe in grace,
I believe in grace anyway.

So I believe I believe
in God
and His grace.
And I hope that is enough.

I believe it is.

Why The Apostles Were Silent

***Matt 16:21-22:** From that time Jesus Christ began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You."*

When Jesus predicted his death, only Peter disagreed. Poor Peter, we all think. So rash. So quick to speak. But what about the remaining eleven? Were they all perfect models of theological sophistication? Did their silence mean they understood and agreed with Jesus, while Peter blundered along, alone in his ignorance and immaturity? Or were there other reasons for their silence?

It turns out, one of them wasn't too sure he believed Peter's pronouncement some moments earlier, about Jesus being the Christ. And if Jesus wasn't really the Christ, it was only reasonable to think He would be killed. The priests and scribes always seemed to kill people who thought they were the Messiah. This Apostle was not surprised, so he was silent.

Another Apostle didn't think Jesus meant he would be *literally* killed. He thought Jesus must be speaking metaphorically and this was just another parable. What could "death" stand for, he wondered. It could mean persecution. It could mean exile. It could mean... almost anything. This one was not troubled, so he was silent.

A third Apostle wasn't paying attention. He was bored after praying for so long, and was still in a daydream as the Master spoke. He wasn't a bad man - just easily distracted. He didn't hear what Jesus said, so he was silent.

The fourth Apostle heard Jesus' prediction and was stunned. The Messiah, the real Messiah, would be killed? He was so surprised that he missed Christ's final words, about being raised to life. How could Jesus be killed, he wondered? What will become of us? The fourth became scared, and so he was silent.

The fifth was very practical. He conveniently forgot to hear the word “must,” and he began making plans to prevent Jesus’ death. “If we go to Egypt...” he mused. “If we get some swords...” or “If we try hard enough to convince the leaders...” He was busy making plans to save Jesus, so he was silent.

The sixth heard Jesus’ prediction and immediately wondered whose fault it would be. One of the others will be responsible for His death - probably Matthew, the ex-tax collector, will do it out of greed. Or Peter, out of stupidity. Or James and John will shoot off at the mouth again and get us *all* killed. The sixth apostle was too busy looking for someone to blame, so he was silent.

The seventh, well, the seventh was hungry. It had been a long time since the loaves and fishes. They had prayed for a long time too. He couldn’t help it, really. He just got hungry sometimes. And when he was hungry, it was hard to concentrate. He knew Jesus was talking about something serious. The chief priests were going to be killed, maybe? He was sure he’d hear about it all again, after he got some food, so he patiently stayed silent.

The eighth agreed with Peter. He’d heard it all, believed it all, and he didn’t want Jesus to be killed. When Peter began speaking, the eighth was relieved. “You tell Him, Peter,” he thought to himself. “Straighten Jesus out. That way I won’t have to say anything. That way I don’t have to make any waves.” The eighth one was content to let Peter speak for him, so he was silent.

The ninth Apostle didn’t like Peter at all. Oh boy, he thought, there goes Peter again. He thought Peter was stupid, blunt and tactless. Peter was too unrefined to be a good Apostle. How dare he argue with Jesus? I sure hope Jesus lets him have it this time, the ninth one thought. He continued a well-worn litany of Peter’s weak points, foibles and failures. He was too busy fault finding to say anything.

The tenth was a thinker. Jesus is going to die and be raised up - what does that mean? What are the theological implications? Where will He be while He’s dead? Will we recognize Him when He comes back? What will happen after that? If He comes back to life once, will He die again later? If so, then what? This one was full of Big Questions and didn’t know which one to ask first, so he stayed silent.

The eleventh one, and I think you know which one he is, had another agenda entirely. I do not know why he did it. I do not know

when Satan entered him, or how. I do not know whether he did it for the money or just because he was tired of wandering around, or any of a dozen other possible motives. For whatever reason, Judas was silent, as he made plans to contact the temple leaders.

This brings us back to Peter. Strong, passionate Peter. He believed Jesus was the Messiah. He knew their enemies were strong. He loved Jesus and did not want Him to be killed. So he stood up, pulled Jesus aside and told Him not to talk that way. You're the Messiah, Jesus! We won't let You get killed. You're the Anointed One, the Mighty King. I don't know what you mean by "be raised," but I understand "be killed" and I don't like the sound of it, not one bit. Please, Jesus, don't talk that way.

So Jesus rebuked Peter, and he deserved it. Peter's vision was too low, and Jesus needed to raise it. His understanding was incomplete, and Jesus needed to broaden it. But his enormous, warm, impulsive, foolish heart was in the right place. With time, his vision and understanding would improve. His passion would be focused.

I know I am not worthy to wash the feet of these Apostles, particularly wonderful Peter. But at the end of the day, each one was just a man. Each one had a long way to go on their path to maturity and understanding and love.

I have a long way to go on my journey as well. I just hope that if I'd been there that day, I would have stood with Peter; poor, passionate Peter.

I hope I would have at least said something.

God Loves Sinners

God love sinners. Is there any happier news? Let's read those three words again, this time a little bigger:

God loves sinners.

See, here's the thing. Jesus Christ was not a moralist - He was a lover. He did not come to Earth in order to set an example of ethical excellence. That is indeed one of the things He did, but it was not His *purpose*. His purpose was to love. Specifically, His purpose was to love sinners.

It's shocking, I know.

Scandalous.

I think that is why they killed Him.

Imagine... an estranged brother shows up at the doorstep on Thanksgiving Day. Piles of food are on the table – far more than enough for all – and this brother is hungry.

Not only is he hungry, he is *here, right this minute*, in the middle of Thanksgiving dinner. It is shocking, I know.

Scandalous.

Where is his sense of propriety?

What should the family do? Ask him to go away and come back tomorrow? Insist on working through all the psychological issues and emotional pain and damage before we share table fellowship, while the turkey grows cold? Or should we just eat... together?

That would be shocking, I know. Scandalous. But I don't think anyone would kill us.

When we reject relationships with people because of their failures, we are worse than the prodigal son's older brother. We are like the Pharisees who criticized Christ for eating and drinking with sinners. They wanted Him to set the tax collectors and prostitutes straight before eating with them and communing with them... before loving them.

He refused.

They wanted condemnation in the name of moral excellence. He gave grace in the name of Love. They wanted justice, in the name of the Law. He gave love and acceptance and friendship, in the name of the Father.

He gave himself. It was shocking, I know.

Scandalous.

More than a little embarrassing, no doubt. I think that is why He did it. I think that is why they killed Him.

He did not excuse the sins of these tax collectors and hookers. No, but He set their sins aside as they all gathered together for a meal. He would deal with sin later, on the cross. The shocking, scandalous, embarrassing cross.

At that moment (and at every moment thereafter), what mattered was *loving the people*, the people who were hungry for so much more than bread. In truth, His love at the table dealt with their sin far more effectively than the condemnation which the Pharisees demanded.

In the story of the prodigal son, the father loved the older son with as much passion as the younger, and for the same reason – simply because he was their father. He spoke words of grace and acceptance to the son who stayed, just as he did to the son who strayed.

And Jesus loved the Pharisees as much as He loved thieves and murderers, because whether they knew it or not, the Pharisees were sinners too.

Jesus knew this, and as I have said, Jesus loves sinners. It is shocking that He would, but He does. *Scandal be damned* – He keeps right on loving sinners.

Jesus loves gay people and straight people. He loves people who commit adultery and He loves people who walk around with lust in their hearts, wishing to commit adultery. He even loves people who walk around with no lust in their hearts whatsoever. It's shocking, I know.

Jesus loves killers and robbers and gangsters. He loves people who walk around with murderous anger in their hearts, and He loves those who have no passion in their hearts at all.

Scandalous!

He loves dictators and scoundrels. He loves the people who hurt you. He loves the people you don't love. And He loves you... whoever you are.

I think that's why offered Himself up and let us kill Him.

We too often misunderstand Paul's admonitions on how to deal with a brother who sins against you. He says to first talk with the person who has committed the offense. If that doesn't work, take it to the church. If that doesn't work, treat that person like a sinner.

Like a sinner?

Indeed.

Like a sinner, who is loved by Jesus Christ.

It's shocking, I know.

It's scandalous.

It's the Good News.

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

1 John 4:7

My Left Knee
A Meditation On The Body Of Christ
(with apologies to St. Paul)

I have an embarrassing story to tell. Two days ago, my right foot tripped over a rock (I guess I wasn't watching where I was going) and I fell down, skinning my left knee. I limped home and went into the bathroom, where my hands cleaned and bandaged my left knee.

The embarrassing part isn't that I was so clumsy – rather, it's the size of the bill my hands sent my left knee “for medical services rendered.”

Apparently, my hands were feeling overworked and underappreciated. They thought they deserved to be paid for their efforts. My hands live pretty far away from my knees most of the time, and since they are not exactly neighbors they felt they had gone above and beyond the call of duty. “It's not like it was an elbow, you know,” my right hand said.

As I'm sure you can imagine, my left knee didn't have any money. But, the bill had to be paid, so it did the only thing it could do in this situation - it sued my right foot, which as you recall, tripped over the rock in the first place.

Well, my right foot wasn't going to take the blame (and it didn't have any money either), so it pointed a finger, so to speak, at my eyes for not providing sufficient warning.

Now, my eyes are relatively close to each other and they cooperate most of the time, but they do have different perspectives and they began a deep, philosophical debate over which eye should have noticed the rock.

As the blame passing continued, my hands became more and more insistent they ought to be paid. They actually threatened to go on strike. Meanwhile, realizing the lawsuit against my right foot was probably not going to produce any money, my left knee moved up

about 12 inches and accused my right knee of intentionally causing the right foot to stumble.

Because they are so similar, my knees have always been somewhat competitive with each other. Still, the left knee's conspiracy theory took things to a whole new level. It actually accused the right one of scheming to destroy or cripple the left one, in an effort to increase the body's dependency on the right one and therefore elevate its importance (since it would then be the only functional knee remaining).

It is an absurd theory, but some other parts of my body thought it was valid and called for a formal investigation to be led by my shoulder blades, presumably because they would bring a different point of view to the quickly deteriorating situation.

This was getting to be too much. My hands staged a work slowdown, my eyes weren't speaking to each other, my knees were trying to out do each other and my shoulder blades had convened an investigative sub-committee headed up by a particularly disagreeable molar.

I guess all the stress was just too much for my right foot, because it wandered off last night and didn't leave a note. Half my body doesn't even want to go look for it, figuring we are better off without such a clumsy appendage. And now I'm starting to get a stomach ache - I wonder what that's all about...

And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

1 Cor 12:21

In The Morning

“Daddy, I got sick last night. It was dark and I was scared. I called you but you didn’t come.”

“Oh, kiddo, I *was* there. I did come.

“I came even before you called. It was dark and you were scared. Your eyes were shut, and you did not see me. You threw up and I held the bucket for you.

“It was dark and late and you were tired. You fell back to sleep right away. And I was there. All night long, watching over you.

“I was there.”

An Excerpt From The Rule of St. Isaac of Lafidonia

St. Isaac of Lafidonia, called Abba Isaac by his contemporaries, was the founder and spiritual leader of a monastery in the middle of the North African desert (modern day Egypt). He was one of several early leaders known today as the Desert Fathers, and he established this community and its Rule around 180 AD.

Members of the community called themselves the Silly-Hatted Merry Monks of Lafidonia. These holy men practiced a communal life that emphasized fellowship, hospitality, grace and humor. They made and drank excellent wine, and their work apparently also involved teaching children through the use of comic drawings and puppets. Their trademark silly hats are still in use in many parts of Christendom, even today.

Archaeologists recently unearthed some incomplete scroll fragments from the monastery. Most of the scrolls contain a complex series of knock-knock jokes which, while remarkably funny, only work in Latin and are not translated here.

The scroll fragments contain a small collection of Abba Isaac's sayings, along with portions of the Rule, which offers a glimpse into daily life among the Silly-Hatted Merry Monks of Lafidonia.

Sayings of Abba Isaac

The way of Christ is joy and the lifting up of our brothers and sisters.

Christ is above, so those who are downcast see Him not, although He is always present, and those who see Him are not downcast. He lifts, elevates and...[*text incomplete*]

Grieving over the loss of a loved one is a sign of love.

Grieving over the sins, struggles and pains of our companions is a sign of compassion.

Grieving over one's own difficulties is self indulgent and displeases the Lord.

Grieving over one's own sins is appropriate, but rejoicing over God's love and grace is the Better Way.

Laughing with one's brothers protects against Anger. Laughing at one's self protects against Pride. Seeking out humor where it may be found protects against Sloth. Sharing humor protects against Greed...
[*text incomplete*]

Helping your brother to laugh is a holy denial of the self.

He who brings laughter and humor to his companions opens the gates of Heaven and spreads Grace.

He who understands the Love of God will be joyful. He who is vigilant for humor and joy worships God.

A hat which is not Silly is a hat which hath lost its purpose.

The desert blooms when laughter is abundant. Like rain, laughter refreshes and brings life to dry places. Like seeds, laughter grows fruit which enriches the community. Like wine, laughter refreshes the... [*text incomplete*]

From The Rule For Daily Life

Upon rising in the morning, the Monks shalt gather and recite the *Quantum Materiae* together. It goeth something like this:

Quantum materiae materietur marmota monax si marmota monax materiam possit materiari? [*transl: How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?*]

... Silly Hats are to be worn, and the making of humorous verse is to be encouraged among the Monks.

Any traveler or visitor who shall seeketh out the comfort of our monastery shall be welcomed and given a Silly Hat. They shall be granted a seat at the Table, be they man or woman or child, and shall be welcomed into Mirth.

...and any Monk who worketh in the Vineyard, whether pruning or harvesting, watering or weeding, shall do so as joyfully as God has granted them joy, and with gratitude – both for hands that work and for work for the hands. They too shall be invited to wear the Silly Hats.

The Monks shall hold converse together over the Table, telling Silly Stories and such jokes as seem fit and funny. And there shall be the singing of songs which maketh men to laugh.

Forgetest thou not the Silly Hats, lest thou be led into temptation. For the wearing of a Silly Hat ensures the Monks taketh not themselves too seriously, and is a reminder of our Holy mission.

Our Lord Jesus Christ once wore a Silly Hat, and we are called to imitate His example.

Let every one eat and drink whensoever he wisheth, and thou shalt restrain them neither from eating nor fasting, as the Lord God grants them wisdom and joy.

Those Monks who art feeling gloomy shalt endeavor to do their work nonetheless, and shalt listen closely to the mouth of God for words that shalt bring a smile, for the uplifting of the Community. They shall not be compelled to wear a Silly Hat, nor shall a Silly Hat be denied them.

Monks who art feeling gloomy shalt attend to the humorous stories of their brothers and any visitors whom the LORD might direct to our humble table. They shalt also get a good night's sleep, so as to feel better in the morning. They shalt try to Smile, as they are able, not as putting on a false front, but as making a sincere decision.

All those of foul, angry, sad, hurt or other moods are to be accepted by the Monks, in true Christian Charity. They are to be neither rejected nor coddled nor made fun of, nor taken too seriously. Rather, they are to be treated with respect, grace and humility. They

are to be offered juggling lessons, funny songs, Silly Hats or quiet time (alone or with the fellowship of the Monks), such as meets their needs.

The Monks shalt be instructed in the ways of humorous drawings and puppetry, for the encouragement and education of the local children. Juggling shalt also be practiced by those brothers who are able, and all are to bear in mind that dropping a juggling ball can be as humorous as not dropping one – and perhaps more so.

Records from this time indicate that Christians often lived in tombs and trash heaps on the edges of major cities, more or less protected by their obscurity.

- Wikipedia entry on *Desert Fathers*

Mikey's Jesus Suit

Early one morning, Mikey finished drying his hair, put on his Jesus suit, and headed out the door, into the wide desert.

The world looks quite different to a person wearing a Jesus suit. For starters, the colors are more vibrant, even in a desert. Especially in a desert.

For another, real things look realer, and false things look somewhat transparent. Mikey couldn't help but chuckle as he walked along and saw the vibrant and the transparent.

Mikey walked past some boys, who threw rocks at him because he was wearing a Jesus suit. The rocks hit him in the back and in the head, and Mikey cried a little. The rocks hurt a lot, but not as much as the throwing.

"Father, forgive them," Mikey whispered.

Some time later, after Mikey had been walking through the desert for a while, an older man suddenly stood in front of him, barring his way and not laughing at all. He poked a heavy, somewhat transparent finger into Mikey's chest, and spoke loudly.

"This isn't your suit. How can you wear this suit? It doesn't fit you at all – take it off right now!"

"I don't know how to answer you, sir. I was given this suit, and even though it is too big for me, I am supposed to wear it. But if you would like to have it, I will gladly give it to you."

"How dare you!" the man replied. "No, I don't want your suit. I have one just like it at home, hanging in my closet. I've had it for years – it used to belong to my father, and I must say it fits me very well indeed. Did I say 'just like it'? No, mine is much nicer. Cleaner. There aren't any tears or stains in mine. No dust or sand – probably because I tend to stay out of the desert when I'm wearing it. But my point is this: you do not know what you are doing in that suit of yours. You are not *worthy* to wear that suit."

“True,” replied Mikey.

“Bah, I can’t argue with you! Such arrogance!” The man stomped away.

Mikey walked along. He saw two people talking together near a little desert lake. They looked up, and one said “Hey, nice suit. Where did you get it?”

“Thanks,” Mikey replied. “It was a gift.”

“Cool. Oh, wait a minute – it looks like the hands are torn,” said one

“No, they are supposed to be that way.”

“Oh. Is it comfortable?” asked the other.

“Yes and no,” Mikey smiled. “Yes, but probably not in the way most people think of comfort.”

“Oh.”

“Would you like to have it?” Mikey asked.

“I don’t know if it’s my size,” said the first one.

“No, it’s not your size,” answered Mikey with a laugh. “Jesus suits are always a bit big, but don’t worry. You’ll grow into it, although as I said, it will always be big. And if you thought it would fit you perfectly, I think you would find it too small.”

“Oh. I don’t understand.” said the other one.

“I know,” replied Mikey. “That’s alright.”

“But I would like to try it,” that one added.

“Me too,” said the first one.

So Mikey took off his Jesus suit, complete with dusty, sandy bare feet and torn hands, and handed it to the two people. They each put it on, and saw that Mikey was wearing one still.

“Cool,” said Andy.

“Yeah,” said Pete.

Mikey walked on, his two new friends at his side. Pete told a funny joke, and they all laughed so loud that some birds were startled and flew away.

They started singing a song, then looked at the road ahead, where they saw a still figure laid out in the sand on the side of the road. It was a little boy, and his limbs were sprawled at awkward angles. They ran to him.

A dozen rocks scattered around the area told a sad tale of pain and rejection, a sorrowful story of throwing. Mikey reached out his Jesus hands, wiping sweat, grime and blood from the boy's forehead.

"Is he breathing?" asked Pete.

"Yes," answered Mikey.

"Will he be ok?" asked Andy.

"Yes," answered Mikey. "Yes, but maybe not in the way most people think of ok."

The boy still grasped a rock in his right hand, the same hand that once cast stones towards Mikey. Nobody knows why the other boys decided to make this boy their new target.

"Little Pauly," Mikey said, "Give me your rock."

The rock slid from Pauly's hand, and he groaned quietly.

Mikey picked up the rock and threw it into the desert, where it was never seen again.

Then Mikey put his Jesus suit on Pauly and helped him stand. The enormous suit made Pauly look tiny and huge, all at once.

Mikey adjusted the Jesus suit he still wore, making sure the beautiful torn hands and lovely dusty, sandy feet were still on securely.

Smiling broadly, accompanied by his three friends, he walked on.

Pete told another joke.

God's Dental Records

I was looking over God's dental records the other day. I didn't expect to find anything particularly interesting – divinity is not prone to cavities, you know – but I studied them nonetheless.

It is not clear *why* I was reviewing His dental records, but then, it doesn't really matter why. We all have our hidden reasons for studying God's x-rays and charts, for inspecting the diagrams that indicate His complete lack of tarter, that reveal not the slightest hint of gingivitis.

His perfect dental health is clearly an example for us all to follow, and I once again committed myself to flossing daily.

Anyway, there I was, looking over God's dental records, when He walked into the room. I knew it was him right away, of course.

I recognized Him by His teeth.

I said a polite hello, then resumed my inspection of His file. As I sat there at my desk, admiring the well-documented gracefulness of the anterior curve on His upper right bicuspid and wondering what brand of toothbrush He used, the Lord leaned over and bit me on the shoulder.

It was a playful bite, mostly, and it surprised more than it hurt. But while it was playful, it was also a very real bite, and yes, it hurt a little. I admit I was relieved to see He didn't break the skin. The bite was full of promise, suggesting more and stronger bites could easily follow.

“Hey! Ow!” I shouted. “Are You allowed to do that? There's nothing in Your record to indicate You are a biter. Seriously, I don't think You should go around biting people like that. It's a little bit crazy!”

He just stood there and smiled at me, silently showing those brilliant white teeth. That's when I noticed His hair. It was curly and twisty and dark. Quite the opposite of His straight, perfect white teeth.

His hair looked shaggy and soft, even mane-like. Lion of Judah indeed! I briefly wondered if He had some hair records I could study. It would be an interesting change from my research into theodontology.

“Run.”

I didn't see His lips move, but I knew He had spoken. In spite of myself, I ran. Without hesitation or destination, I ran, scattering dental records in my wake. I think the bite had a lot to do with that decision.

To this day, I can't say for sure if He was chasing me or leading the way. When I looked back, He was there, and I think I felt His breath on my neck. But when I looked ahead, he was there too. I also might have been riding on His back at some point, but I can't say for sure. This running was much harder to understand than the dental records.

The next thing I knew, I was with a big crowd of other runners. Some were fast, some were slow. Several were pushing themselves to the limit, sweating and straining and running as fast as they could. Others were obviously not running as fast as they could, preferring instead to run alongside a slower runner and provide encouragement. Many were walking.

I tried to find others whose teeth were as nice as mine – I mean as nice as His – but it's hard to see a person's teeth when you're both running. After a while, I stopped trying to look at teeth. I just focused on running.

A tall, thin runner with hair dyed bright green came alongside me.

“Hi, I'm Pacer Jim,” he said. “Stick with me, and I'll help you run.”

So I ran with Pacer Jim and learned how to handle hills, when to walk and when to run. He knew all the best rest areas, where we could get orange slices and cups of water from friendly volunteers. Eventually, he sprayed my hair green to match his and I became a pacer too.

I still think about God's dental records sometimes. They really are quite something. In my mind's eye, I can still see His brilliant white teeth, with their complete lack of tarter, and not the slightest hint

of gingivitis. But most importantly, I can still feel the spot on my shoulder where He bit me.

The Story I Didn't Want To Write

(Dedicated to Prof Jerry Harvey)

Please pardon my asking this question, but I really must. Sensitive readers might want to skip on to the next chapter. I would like to skip on to the next chapter, but I can't. Instead, I have to ask this question: Whenever Jesus farted, do you think He always claimed it?

I bet he did. I can imagine Him saying “Whoa, sorry fellas! I guess that leftover fish chowder didn't agree with Me. You twelve might want to move upwind for a while.”

I find it easier to imagine Him saying that than to imagine Him secretly, silently letting one go and hoping it would be unnoticed by the rough crowd of already-pungent fishermen He hung out with.

No doubt they would have blamed each other for it, if He tried that approach. And even if they knew it was from Him, they would have been too respectful to complain, so He probably could have gotten away with it if He wanted to. But I can't imagine Him trying to get away with it.

I can't imagine Him trying to get away with anything.

Whenever Jesus farted, I'll bet he said something.

Now, I realize it is not nice to imagine Jesus farting. I apologize for planting the thought in your head. I particularly apologize if this image returns to your mind at inconvenient times, like when you are about to say grace, share communion, or deliver a sermon. I really am sorry about that.

But the thing is, Jesus had a body. A regular body. And He ate food – regular food. Stuff happens, as the saying goes, and I think biblical scholars would back me up on this. I'm pretty sure Jesus farted as much as anyone else. The question is, what did He do when that happened?

The reason for bringing all this up is simple: Jesus still has a body, and His body is the Church. Naturally, the Body of Christ still farts occasionally, simply because it is a body.

Again, I apologize for the crude imagery, I really do. Nonetheless, let's go back to that first question: how do *we* respond, how do *we* act, when we as the Body of Christ create an unpleasant smell in the environment around us? Do we step up, claim it, and apologize? Or do we pretend it didn't happen?

Worse yet, do we pretend it never happens?

I didn't want to write this little story. I'd like to say my reluctance has to do with a sophisticated preference for highbrow humor over fart jokes (and I would also like to defensively point out this story is *not* a fart joke, even though it probably is). But my reluctance has nothing to do with questions of style or sophistication. The truth is, I'd rather not think about this sort of thing.

I'd rather pretend it never happens and I'd rather ignore it when it does. But somehow, I can't imagine that's what Jesus did.

Communion?

On the top of a mountain in the heart of the Adirondacks, a group of young people stopped to have lunch. They'd been hiking for hours on this beautiful fall morning, and they were very hungry.

Pat produced a large loaf of French bread from his backpack and began to pass it around. Tim suggested that since they had bread, they could share communion, right there in the wilderness, in front of God and everybody.

Eric was offended at the suggestion, because they had no priest to say the right words. Jennifer was offended because they had no wine. Jonathon would have been offended if they had had wine.

The bread was not unleavened, so Tom pointed out it would not count and would probably be inappropriate. Heather asked whether they could even call it communion, since the calendar said it was Saturday, not Sunday.

Scott suggested they first resolve the question of whether the bread was symbolically or literally the Body of Christ. Kevin pointed out that the hikers all belonged, or didn't belong, to a number of different churches, and Biblically, true *koinonia* required a level of doctrinal, organizational and practical unity this little group had clearly not achieved.

The wind blew. Birds sang. The mountainside crawled with unseen wildlife, hidden beneath the changing and falling leaves. The small group of hikers stood there, on top of the mountain, with bread in their hands and hunger in their bellies. They looked around.

Here's the amazing part, the unbelievable part, the part where you, gentle reader, may decide to throw this book down in exasperation and shout "He's just making all this stuff up!" The fantastic twist to the story is this: they did it. They broke the bread, shared it, and called it communion.

What did it mean, this breaking of the bread among friends, on top of a mountainous cathedral not made with human hands? Was it a

blind, ignorant denial of deep and profound divisions? Was it an act of disobedience? Impropropriety? Or was it a true sharing in the Body of Christ?

Was it love? Was it hunger? Was it something else entirely? Are these even the right questions?

Perhaps the hikers weren't wrong, exactly, in their objections or in their communion. Maybe they weren't quite right either. But right or wrong, exactly or inexactly, offensively or innocently, they broke the bread, shared it, and remembered Christ. And then they came down from the mountain.

A Meditation On Patience

My dad says to be careful when you pray for patience, because God answers prayers. My dad says that if you ask God to give you patience, He will not only give it to you, He will also give you opportunities to exercise and use this new gift, and that can be difficult. My dad is right, of course, as dads often are.

ΑΩ

God is the most patient one of all. It's amazing how patient He is. It's maddening how patient He is. That is, His patience with *me* is amazing and wonderful. His patience with *other people* can be maddening and disturbing.

ΑΩ

See how patient God is with that guy over there? That evil dictator who murdered and oppressed and displaced and raped and violated a whole country's worth of people, for decades and decades? Why should God be patient with that guy?

Or look at that child molester, who left a damaged trail of dozens, or maybe hundreds, over the years. Why should God be patient with that guy? How *dare* God be patient with that guy?

ΑΩ

What about the gossip, the glutton, the greedy – the people who commit sins (and are committed to committing sins) which I would never commit. It just doesn't seem right that God would be patient with those people. It doesn't seem right, does it?

He should stop them. He should destroy them. I don't want God to be patient with them.

ΑΩ

It is a wonderful thing that God is patient. It is a wonderful thing He does not reach down and destroy sinners at the first sign of wrong-doing and law-breaking... or even the 490th sign of it.

It is wonderful the way He gives people another chance to repent, another day to discover His mercy and love, even though I know (I *know!*) they will never turn, never repent, never accept. It is wonderful that He patiently gives these opportunities to people I gave up on long ago.

It is wonderful that God has patience for the destroyers, oppressors, molesters, bombers and robbers. It is wonderful how patient He is with those who do not respect their parents, who take His name in vain. It is wonderful how patient He is with those who do not love Him with all their heart, mind and strength. It is wonderful how patient He is with us all.

AΩ

It is wonderful that He is patient with me. It is wonderful that He is even patient with my impatience.

When I pray for patience, I am asking God to make me more like Him. And as my dad taught me, God answers prayers.

AΩ

The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.

2 Pet 3:9

The Break Master Arrives

(Part II)

There is a knock on the door, but I am not expecting any visitors. The knocking does not stop. Someone is standing at my door, knocking.

“Who is it?” I ask.

“The Break Master,” he replies.

“Oh,” I say, unsure what to do.

“I want to come in. Will you open the door?”

“Yes.”

The Break Master comes inside. His eyes are gentle. His hands are scarred from years of breaking things, from years of breaking everything. But somehow, they look gentle too.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“It is time for your Break.”

“I know that now. Will it hurt?”

“Yes. But I will be here, and you can trust me. My yoke for you is easy. My burden for you is light. I am the Break Master, and there is nothing I will not Break. There is nothing I will not Remake.

“And,” He continued, “I am also the Break Master in this way: I have come to give you a Break. I have come to give you rest. I have come to give you life.”

And then the Break Master, the Lord of Breaking Things and Broken Things, the Lord of Remaking Things and Remade Things, does what only He can do.

He Breaks everything.

(to be continued)

Playing The Telephone Game in Church History

In some ways, history is like a big game of Telephone. You know, that game where you all sit in a line and whisper a message to the person sitting next to you, who then whispers it to the person sitting next to them, and so on... By the end of the line, the message has usually changed, often in funny ways.

In some ways, history is like that.

Once upon a time, a very wise and holy man pointed out that we should show reverence to God. This wasn't just his personal opinion - I think it was probably God Himself who, in His Grace and Mercy and Love, pointed this out to His cherished children.

This wise and holy man, beloved by God, passed the message along.

"We should show reverence to God."

Faithful followers throughout the ages repeated this truth:

"We should show reverence to God."

At some point, very naturally and understandably, for a multitude of reasons (some good, some bad, some in the middle), the message became:

"We should bow before God, to show reverence to Him."

This seemed like a good idea at the time.

Then, very naturally and reasonably, people explained to each other "We should bow only to God, to show reverence to Him." Do you even notice the change? Did they?

And then "Do not bow to man, for such reverence should be reserved for God alone."

"It is wrong to bow to man, for such reverence should be reserved for God alone."

"It is wrong to bow to a man."

"It is wrong to bow."

"It is wrong to bow to God, for this is a hold-over of a patristic tradition that originates in a monarchical society."

And so what began as "do not treat man the way you should treat God" became "do not treat God the way you should not treat man."

And the funny thing is, we play this game quite often.

Brother Mustard's Chores

As Brother Mustard was doing his evening chores, running the vacuum cleaner and emptying the trash cans, he told the following story to the rest of the cleaning crew.

One evening after supper, Peter was washing the dishes, for it was his turn. Jesus came into the kitchen and began to take the trash out.

“Lord, You don’t need to do that,” Peter said. “It’s my night to clean up.”

Jesus replied, “You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.”

“Surely not, Lord,” Peter said, “You shall not empty my trash can. I’ll take care of it as soon as I’m done with the dishes.”

“I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “Unless I take your trash out, you will have no part with me.”

“Oh! In that case, then don’t just take out the kitchen trash, but empty the trash cans in the other rooms as well!” Peter said, gesturing wildly with his soapy, wet hands, spraying droplets and bubbles all over the kitchen.

And Jesus answered, “The trash in the rest of your house is clean, but the food scraps in the kitchen trash will start to get smelly after a little while. All we really need to do right now is take out this trash.”

And so He brought it out to the curb, for behold, the next morning was trash day. When He came back inside, He sat down at the table with all the disciples.

“Do you understand what I have done for you?” He asked. “You call me Teacher and Lord, and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have taken out your trash, you also should take out each other’s trash. I have set you an example that you

should follow. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”

And then Brother Mustard cinched up the bag of trash he was holding and stepped outside, to leave it on the curb, for behold, the next morning was trash day.

If people never did silly things, nothing intelligent would ever get done.

- Ludwig Wittgenstein

The Word and The Words

Did you know that we do not have the original documents for any of the books of the New Testament? Not a single one? All we have are copies (and often copies of copies). Why didn't God preserve the original texts of the Bible?

He could have, you know. If He'd wanted to, He really could have.

It must not have been important to Him, which is perhaps a startling thought to many people in an age that has an unfortunate tendency to idolize the Scriptures. Protecting, preserving, and otherwise perpetuating the original copies of the books of the Bible is not something God thought was worth while.

How strange.

How wonderful.

It's a big mystery why He did what He did, and didn't do what He didn't do. I guess that's why He's God and we're not.

Maybe, just maybe, it was actually *very* important to Him that the originals *not* be preserved. Maybe He protected us from those originals... or more precisely, He protected us from our own attitudes towards those originals. Our attitude towards the translations is problematic enough - imagine if we still had the originals.

We already have people running around proclaiming "If the King James Version was good enough for Jesus and the Apostles, it's good enough for me." Imagine if we had the exact same texts, the original manuscripts, that the early Church used.

Imagine...

And yet, in a sense, we do have what the early Church had. The funny thing is, the *really* early Church didn't have the Bible at all. Sure, they had the Apostles (to be precise, some of them had some of them), but it was decades before the Gospels and epistles were written

down. Putting them all together in this particular order took even longer.

The point is, we don't have the originals, but neither did the early Church, not really. They just had copies... and copies of copies.

God knows why.

(And don't get me started on global literacy rates through out history, or the 1400 years between the Bible being written and the development of the printing press. Inexpensive copies of Scripture in the hands of literate believers is a very modern development, yet we treat it as if it were historically normative.)

As I was saying, all we have today are translations... and translations of translations... interpretations... and interpretations of interpretations. Just like the early church did.

And that's a very good thing.

Don't take my word for it. Ask the Guy who preserved – or didn't preserve – the originals. I bet He knew what He was doing. I bet He did it on purpose.

Because it's really not about the Bible. It's really not about the words. It's about the Word.

Did you also know the Bible did not come with a table of contents? It's true. The table of contents – or to use the technical term, the *canon* – is not actually part of the canon. How weird is that?

So not only did God not preserve the original texts of the books of the Bible... He didn't even tell us which books belonged there. Not really. Not directly. He sort of left that up to us and our ability to listen to His Spirit. I'm not trying to imply anything here – I'm just stating a fact.

Does this mean the Bible is untrustworthy? Does this mean we just made it all up? Of course not. But if honesty matters, we would do well to recognize the limits of what we know about the Good Book. We would do well to acknowledge certain attributes which we might prefer to ignore or gloss over.

The Roman Catholic Church established its canon in 1546 at the Council of Trent. It is less clear when exactly the Reformers established their canon, but it was some time later. Over fifteen hundred years seems like a long time to wait.

What *is* clear is the following: God did not descend from On High with a table of contents, a scriptural grocery list, saying “Ok, we’ll need 4 Gospels, 21 epistles... oh, and can you throw in an apocalypse too?” Nor did he say “Peter, here are the blue prints for a printing press, so make sure everyone get’s a copy of the Bible when it’s finished.”

Nope, He did nothing of the sort.

He did not whisper into the ear of a mystic nor did He carve stone Tablets of Contents for Peter or Paul or any church leaders that followed.

He simply trusted His Body, led by His Holy Spirit, to figure out what belonged and what didn't. He allowed tradition to happen, to shape the book we now use.

God knows why.

**A Psalm of Trust
In a Time of Plenty**

Hear my cry, O Lord, and hasten to my aid
Be not slow to hear or to help.

Fear is far from me; Safety and confidence surround me.
The land is overflowing with abundance, The fruit of the land is
plentiful.

I am not in the midst of lions;
I lie among no ravenous beasts.
No fierce men conspire against me.
My friends are stalwart and loving.
How, then, shall I rely on you?

Save me, O God, for the waters of comfort have come up to my neck.
I sink in the miry depths of contentment, where there is no need for a
divine foothold.

The local grocery store brings forth seven kinds of olives.
The grapes in the produce section are too numerous to count.
Soft bread is everywhere.
Whole grain bread is always within reach.
Yea, I am in the midst of abundance,
I have too much food.

My job is secure and pays well.
I have all the wealth I need, and enough to share.
No famine or drought threatens,
Wars are not at the border; the enemy is far from the gate.

How, then, can I trust You, O Lord, when my needs are so few
and my desires are satisfied?
How long, O God, will you permit this comfort, which tempts me to
look not to you?
How long must I resist the soft temptations of abundance?

Though my bed is soft and my climate is controlled,
though clean water and good food abound,
though my body is healthy and my mind is sharp,
though my companions are faithful,
yet will I trust in You,
yet will I acknowledge You.

My soul finds rest in God alone.
My salvation comes from you.

Playing Telephone Again

An interesting thing happens when you play the telephone game with a simple message.

“I love you.”

“I love you.”

“I love you.”

Yes, it’s interesting how certain messages can be conveyed, unchanged, through out the ages.

"Jesus lives"

"Jesus lives"

"Jesus lives"

"Jesus lives"

The Boy Who Wasn't Crying Inside

Have you heard the story about the boy who was presented with a room full of manure on Christmas morning? It's an old story, with several variants, but the punch line is always the same. Shovel in hand, the boy digs enthusiastically, happily proclaiming "There must be a pony in here somewhere!"

I think it's a beautiful story (a *good* story), and I hesitate to comment on it at all. I suspect that any additions of mine or attempts to expand on this little vignette will only detract from its wonderful art, but it appears I can't help myself, so here I go.

Maybe you will read the following words with the same enthusiasm as the boy in the story, confident of finding a pony in this pile of paragraphs. If so, I hope you find it.

Here's what I love about the story: the boy did not deny the existence of the manure. Quite the opposite – it was the very manurish nature of the manure, the freshness, moisture and odor of it, that convinced him there must be a pony around here somewhere.

He didn't say he liked manure. He wasn't excited about its value as fertilizer and he did not deny its origin or its nature. He seems not to have given it much consideration at all, beyond recognizing it for what it was. The boy was the ultimate realist.

Because it was real manure and he knew it was real manure – stinky, messy excrement, and not candy, not sand, not anything else – the boy was happy. Not about the manure itself, but about the pony it indicated.

Some people think the boy is silly, an opinion that unintentionally stumbles upon a great truth. Our modern word silly comes (in part) from an old German word *selig*, which meant *blessed* or *pious*. A wiser age than ours understood that silliness is next to godliness. Yes, the pony-seeking boy is silly, because he is blessed. He is silly because he is pious.

Some people believe the boy is actually crying inside, that his enthusiasm (from old Greek words which mean *possession by a god*) and exuberance (from an old Latin word meaning *overabundance, or thoroughly fruitful*) mask a deeper sorrow. Some even contend the boy's overabundant inspiration does more than mask the sorrow – they go so far as to claim it is actually *evidence* of sorrow.

(Some people do not understand joy, but that is not really their fault. Some people mistrust hope. I can't really blame them.)

These sad people suspect the boy has a pathological inability to express his true feelings, which are surely closer to despair than joy. They believe there is something wrong with a person who reacts to manure the way this boy did.

They think the boy in that story needs to get out of denial and embrace the wretched sorrow of reality. By all means, wallow in the turds, they advise, but do not expect a pony.

There is no pony.

There is only a shovel and there is only tears.

They contend that anyone who thinks or behaves otherwise needs therapy. Anyone who thinks or behaves otherwise needs medication. That's a shame.

As for me, I think the silly boy is right. I think the silly boy is silly and holy, which is the same thing. I am quite sure he is not crying inside.

When the boy cries (and no doubt he does cry from time to time), his tears will always be on the outside, as befits a boy of such silly strength and holy enthusiasm.

I think the silly holy boy really *believes*, and the joy of that belief is his strength.

“There's got to be a pony around here somewhere!” he shouted with joy.

Jesus Christ was the original enthusiast, the God-Man, the *en-theos*. He cried on the outside. He was silly on the outside too. Silly-holy.

“There is a pony right around the corner,” he shouted from the cross, with enthusiasm. With exuberance.

How exciting! How wonderful!

What Good News! What Joy!

There's got to be a pony around here somewhere, the boy said,
with exuberance.

With enthusiasm.

With joy and hope.

Oh yes, there's a pony around here somewhere.

*Be joyful always,
Pray continually,
Give thanks in all circumstances,
for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

1 Thes 5:16-18

At The Gates

Joe walked up to the Pearly Gates with confidence. He knew this stuff cold, and was ready for his test.

“Come in, my brother,” said St. Peter, holding the gate open. “Our Lord is inside and has prepared a place for you. Enter into your rest.”

“Yeah, just a minute,” answered Joe. “Don’t you want to quiz me first? You didn’t ask me any questions at all.”

“Dear Joe, there is no quiz. The Spirit and the Bride simply bid you to come in.”

“Revelation 22, right? I *totally* know that one. But come on, Peter, at least check to make sure I was baptized the right way. You and I both know a lot of people are on the wrong side of the whole infant/adult debate, and let’s not forget the old sprinkle/submerge question. Go ahead, ask me about mine.”

“There is no need...” St. Peter began, before Joe cut him off.

“Fine, fine, I get the picture,” said Joe, shaking his head. “I always figured you guys were more professional than this, but I guess it’s your call. Let’s get right to eschatology then. My position on the millennium...”

“Is irrelevant,” answered St. Peter. “I’m afraid you don’t understand yet.”

“What? Of course I understand the millennium. Scripture clearly states...” Joe paused. “Wait a minute. Is this a test?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you, dear Joe. There is no test,” replied St. Peter.

“Oh, I get it. I get it. You tell me there isn’t a test – *that’s* the test! You want to see if I’ll just walk right in, don’t you. You’re testing my commitment to theological excellence and tempting me with cheap grace. I totally get it! You can’t fool me.” Joe grinned and folded his arms.

“Apparently not,” St. Peter replied.

“Well, we can get back to theology in a minute. Let’s just go ahead with the morality check. I never...”

“Please, the list of sins you did not commit is of no interest here, and of even less value. Your Savior knows you and loves you.”

“At least make me recite a creed or prayer or explain the trinity or something,” Joe said. Then a light went on in Joe’s head.

“Hold on. Are you telling me there are people in there who believe in...”

“Yes,” answered St. Peter.

“And who were baptized by...”

“Yes,” he said again.

“And who did...”

“Yes,” he replied for the third time. “We’ve got quite a colorful group behind this gate.”

“Oh. Oh, I see,” answered Joe with a shake of his head. “Never mind, then. I don’t think I’d like it there.”

“Oh, but you will. Just step inside and see!”

“I don’t think I will,” Joe answered with finality, then turned and walked away.

St. Peter sighed as he watched Joe walk off into the mist and disappear.

“Well, it was worth a try,” St. Peter said to the wind that suddenly began to blow.

And the Spirit and the bride say “Come.”

And let the one who hears say “Come.”

*And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes
take the water of life without cost.*

Rev 22:17

For God's Sake

I've been told Jesus died for me, for my sake, so I might have eternal life. I'm not sure that's quite the case. Rather, I am coming to understand that Jesus died for *God*.

True, He died that I may have eternal life with God, but He did it for God's own purpose and pleasure.

Jesus died for God's sake, because He loves His Father like crazy. He died for me too, because He and Our Father love me like crazy too, but you see, it's not about me.

It's not about me at all.

It's about God.

I'm pretty sure Jesus lived and died for God's sake.

Brother Mustard's Prayers

Towards the end of his life, when Brother Mustard was very old, some people said to him, "Teach us how to pray, Brother Mustard."

And Brother Mustard laughed.

"You might as well ask me to teach your heart to beat or your stomach to digest," he replied. "I don't know how these things happen, and besides, how can I teach you to do what you are already doing? And yet heartbeats and digestion can be made healthier, so I will talk with you about prayer, but maybe we won't call it *teaching*."

"Prayer," he continued, "is simply talking with God. Everything you do and everything you say is said and done to God, who hears and sees and knows everything. That's why I said there is no learning *how*. There is only learning *about*. There is only deciding and being deliberate with our prayers. But I assure you – you already pray a lot more than you realize."

"Jesus once told a story about some sheep and goats. Have you read that one? To the goats on the left, he said something like 'You prayed for riches and asked Me to curse the people around you. You shouted obscenities at Me. Begone, for I know you not.'

"And they responded to the Lord, 'When did we pray for riches, Lord, or ask You to curse the people around us? When did we shout obscenities at You?'

"Jesus answered, 'I tell you the truth, when you dedicated all your thoughts and actions towards collecting earthly riches for yourself, you prayed for riches and worshiped them. When you did not share your wealth with your poor neighbors, you were praying that I would curse them. When you shouted obscenities at the driver who cut you off in traffic, you shouted obscenities at Me.'

"To those on his right, He said 'When I was lonely, you kept Me company. When I was frustrated, you were loving and gentle with Me. When I was ignorant, you patiently explained things.'

“And they replied, ‘Lord, when were You lonely or frustrated? When did we see You ignorant and explain things to You?’

“He answered, ‘When you had a kind word for the harried, frustrated security guard, you were speaking love and singing worship to Me. When you patiently explained things to the least of these, you did it to Me.’”

Brother Mustard continued. “Do not worry that your prayers might be insufficient, infrequent or otherwise inadequate. I assure you, they are *completely* inadequate. Get used to it. But trust God, for we know the Holy Spirit prays for us with groans that words cannot express.

“Your best prayers are as crayon doodles compared to the Holy Spirit’s briefest groan, and even if you spent all your time ‘praying’ and used beautiful words, your prayer would still be a poor candle. And that’s alright. God understands.

“Prayer is also listening. Silence can be hard, but hearing God without silence is even harder. So seek communion with God through prayer and silence, but even if your prayer life consists of nothing more than experiencing God’s silence and hoping for consolation, that is enough. Faith, hope and love are always enough, especially love. Especially the Father’s love.

“One thing to keep in mind, my friends: prayer does not work. That is, prayer does not ‘work,’” Here he made air quotes with his fingers, “as if prayer was a mechanism for obtaining something, or had some concrete objective beyond nurturing a relationship with Our Father. Prayer is... well, I don’t really know how to finish that sentence, without going on all day, which wouldn’t really help anyone.

“My recommendation? Pray. Pray when you can, pray how you can, and realize that in your life, you probably even pray when you don’t know you’re praying. Beware of the times when you’re not praying, even though you think you are.

“But don’t force prayer. Don’t force faith. Strive to pray well and often, and trust Him when you can’t strive.

“Even if all you can do is half-trust the God you half-believe in, that is enough. God understands. Whisper when you can’t shout, and shout when you can’t whisper. The rest is in God’s hands.”

And then it was time to sleep, so Brother Mustard said his prayers and went off to bed.

Searching The Scriptures For Questions

How then shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it? (*Mark 4:30*)

Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him? (*Mark 4:37*)

Who do you say I am? (*Matt 16:15*)

Why do you call Me good? (*Luke 18:19*)

Have you anything here to eat? (*Luke 24:41*)

Where are we to buy bread, that these may eat? (*John 6:5*)

How many loaves do you have? (*Matt 15:34*)

Why is He eating and drinking with tax-gatherers and sinners? (*Mark 2:16*)

When I sent you out without purse and bag and sandals, you did not lack anything, did you? (*Luke 22:35*)

Why are you so timid? How is it that you have no faith? (*Mark 4:40*)

Which is easier, to say to the paralytic 'Your sins are forgiven'; or to say, 'Arise, and take up your pallet and walk'? (*Mark 2:9*)

You do not want to go away also, do you? (*John 6:67*)

If God is for us, who is against us? (*Rom 8:31*)

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? (*Rom 8:35*)

Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you? (*John 8:10*)

Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity? (*Job 2:10*)

And when did we see you sick, or in prison, and come to you? (*Matt 25:39*)

My God, My God, why have You abandoned Me? (*Matt 27:46*)
Why do you seek the living One among the dead? (*Luke 24:5*)

Simon, son of John, do you love Me? (*John 21:16*)

Where are you? (*Gen 3:9*)

And no one was able to answer Him a word, nor did anyone dare from that day on to ask Him another question.

Matt 22:46

The Mountain Of Wisdom

On the windswept heights of a mountain range that belongs to no country, beyond countless deserts, above even some clouds and above those little birds that don't fly very high – you know the ones - far from the might of kings and rulers and middle-managers, The Wise Master sits in silent contemplation.

Just as the monogamous prairie vole skitters through a meadow, seeking grass and seeds to grind with its flat-crowned molars, so too the lucid mind of The Wise Master moves across the landscape of reality and non-reality, discovering crunchy-sweet nuggets of wise goodness which he freely shares with those daring enough to seek his insight.

So it came to pass, on a particular day in the month of Diauq, at approximately 0900 Local Mountain Time, a traveler approached. His long journey through treacherous mountain passes and slippery slopes was behind him, and he now faced the eponymous, enigmatic Master.

Without a whisper, so as not to disturb the undisturbable, the walker reverently approached that most adept of Teachers and slowly lowered himself into a sitting position beside the unmoving paragon of meditation, grimacing slightly because his legs were sore from walking up that mountain, which was actually pretty tall, you know.

Hours passed as a moment. The winds flew by on their unknowable journeys, conveying the essence of the mountain from place to place and bringing rain upon those below. A fly freely landed upon the Master's cheek, and freely did it leave some moments later. The traveler student walker, whose legs were starting to feel a little better now, learned wisdom from that fly.

If only he had wings too, his legs would not ache so much. But surely his wings would also become tired from too much flying. But he has no wings, and so he can't know for sure. This was the beginning of wisdom.

When the time was right and the student was ready, the Master wisely opened his eyes and addressed the traveler in wisdom.

"How are your legs feeling?" he asked.

"A little better, but they'll be sore tomorrow for sure."

"Make sure you drink plenty of fluids, ok? It's really important to stay hydrated, particularly at this altitude."

"Right."

The student paused.

"I definitely will. But first, oh Master, share with me your wisdom."

"Certainly, my child," the Master agreed, although the thing had already been done.

He paused, and nothingness hung as a shaken void in the hands of Achi Chokyi Drolma, the peaceful white Drikung Kagyu protector who rides upon her blue-maned snow lion. Then, the Master spoke.

"Life is like Donkey Kong, my son. The original arcade version, you understand, not that new Kong Country stuff for Gameboys. I'm talking about the classic two dimensional game."

"I do not understand," said the student. This too was the beginning of wisdom.

"I will explain. Life is like Donkey Kong because no matter how many ladders you climb, there is always another bottom rung to grasp. What seems to be progress only brings you to a new level, where the barrels roll faster and the game space is tougher to navigate." The Master paused slightly and waved his hand over a wilted flower which bloomed magnificently at his touch.

"Life is like Donkey Kong," he continued, "because there is always some giant monkey throwing stuff at you, and you really have to jump around a lot to avoid getting smushed."

"Oh Master, this wisdom is difficult to bear. Is life indeed so bleak and meaningless? Is there no rest from climbing ladders, no way to stop that darn monkey from throwing barrels at me? Must we remain trapped in the illusion that activity equals progress?"

In the valley below, a maiden boiled water for tea.

"Your questions are meaningless, my child, because they are built on a foundation of misperceived reality, as if That Which Is were the same as That Which Must Be. I said nothing of meaninglessness or bleakness, only rungs and monkeys. In your confusion, you inferred a lack of meaning where there is no such lack.

"You see," he continued, "The ladders and barrels are drudgery to those with drudgery in their minds, but they are play to those with play in their hearts. Yes, life is like Donkey Kong, but don't forget - Donkey Kong is pretty fun."

An eagle flew overhead, and wisdom was in its feathers.

“Given a choice between a folly and a sacrament, one should always choose the folly – because we know a sacrament will not bring us closer to God, and there’s always a chance that a folly will.”

- Erasmus

The Worst Candle

Look at that candle over there. It's got to be the worst candle in the world. Why does it even bother? Let me tell you what's wrong with it (because I am sort of an expert on this sort of thing).

For starters, it's too small. It's tiny, and it's crooked. It hardly puts out any light at all. Good candles are large and straight.

Then, it doesn't smell nice, and I assure you candles are supposed to smell nice. Good candles smell nice. Expensive candles smell nice. This one sort of stinks. What a cheap candle.

And what a mess it's made of the table – look! There is wax everywhere. Now, who is going to clean that up, I'd like to know. Not me, that's for sure. I'm not responsible for cleaning up after that stupid, messy candle. I can't believe how much wax it has dripped. Good candles don't make a mess.

What a terrible candle.

And why is it way over *there*? Way the heck over *there*! It should be over here, where I am. It doesn't put out much light in the first place, and with it sitting way over there, I scarcely have enough light to see.

What a terrible candle. Why does it even bother?

I bet it will go out any moment now, and good riddance, I say.

But when it goes out, what will I do?

It's the only candle around, and it's getting dark.

A Meditation on Difficulty

We do not live in a utopia. Until Christ returns (or until we get to Heaven, which ever comes first), we will have difficulties. That's simply a fact of life on this side of eternity.

This is good news.

AΩ

Difficulties help us grow, learn, etc. They make us stronger.

It is not always fun to get stronger.

St. James said to consider it pure joy when we encounter difficulties of many kinds. He was either crazy or inspired.

AΩ

I generally don't consider it pure joy when I encounter a difficulty of even one kind, let alone difficulties of many kinds.

AΩ

Westerners living in the early 21st century have it easier than 99% of the people who have ever lived. Practically all of our basic physical needs are met, so our angst over unmet psychological needs is amplified.

We forget that clean water and shade are rare gifts in the Desert, because at this moment we have them in such abundance. In our forgetting, there is an absence of thanks and an absence of joy. There is also an absence of many kinds of difficulty.

AΩ

“It is hard. It's just so hard to do what I do. It's so hard to be me,” someone said.

“Is it actually hard, or is it just not going well, not going the way you want it to? Would you still complain about the difficulty if the outcome was more to your liking?” someone else replied.

AΩ

We do not live in a utopia. Difficulties are a fact of life this side of eternity.

Jesus said “In this world, you will have trouble, but take heart, for I have overcome the world.”

Jesus was either crazy or inspired.

AΩ

“Life is hard. So very hard,” someone said.

“Of course it is. What did you expect?” someone else replied.

AΩ

No matter how good, talented, smart or lucky you are, sometimes things won't go the way you want them to.

Most people don't need to be told this. However, this seems to be news to some people.

AΩ

There is a difference between a *difficulty* and an undesired *outcome*. Much of what we call “difficulties” are simply situations where life isn't going the way we want it to go.

AΩ

“Life is hard. So very hard.”

“Yes it is. Let me give you a hand... and an ear... and a shoulder...”

AΩ

Self pity makes life harder. Feeling bad about your life, your situation, your self... feels bad.

AΩ

I don't really know much about difficulty. Not really. There are people in this world who know less about it than I do, but my life has been easier than the lives of most of the people who have ever lived.

I don't know if that is good news or not.

AΩ

The problem is not that life is hard. The problem is that we don't enjoy difficulties.

Climbing Mt. Everest is hard, but nobody complains. Nobody says it should be easier to get to the top, or that it's not fair for it to be so difficult. They actually revel in the challenge.

They wouldn't climb it if it were easy.

AΩ

Difficulty and fairness have nothing to do with each other. A situation can be one or the other, both or neither.

AΩ

Consider it pure joy when you encounter difficulties, said St. James. That is worth repeating.

AΩ

A really good chess match is good because it is hard. An easy match is worse than boring. It's pointless.

The problem is not that life is difficult. The problem is that we often find our difficulties meaningless.

We are generally more than willing to put up with all sorts of pain and suffering if we can see some meaning in it.

Jesus was willing to put up with all sorts of pain and suffering. So was St. Paul. I am pretty sure they saw meaning in their pain and suffering. They were either crazy or inspired.

AΩ

Sometimes I suspect that life is precisely as hard as it should be.

We do not live in a utopia, and that is a good thing.

But then again, I don't know much about difficulties, so I could be wrong.

AΩ

We are all climbing our own Mt. Everest. It is not easy for most of us, most of the time.

I suspect it is not supposed to be easy.

AΩ

Jesus said "I will never give you more than you can bear." He said "My yoke is easy, my burden is light."

It can be difficult to reconcile these statements with our lives, our difficulties.

Perhaps we are making more of our hardships than we ought? Perhaps not.

AΩ

We do not live in a utopia. Until Christ returns (or until we get to Heaven, which ever comes first), we will have difficulties. That's simply a fact of life on this side of eternity.

This is good news.

The Dropper

His name was Josh, but all the students at The Master's Juggling Academy called him The Dropper. He wasn't a very good juggler, you see.

He moved a bit slower than most of the other students. His eyes seemed to operate on a half-second delay, and his hands were another half-second behind his eyes. As you can imagine, being a full second behind reality makes juggling harder than it already is.

He actually wasn't a terrible juggler. He could do the Cascade pattern, of course, but anyone can do the Cascade. He was reasonably tolerable with the Shower, which requires a bit more speed, but you could tell he was really straining to do it. All of the fancier tricks seemed far beyond his grasp – no pun intended.

He was a nice enough person, in a quiet way. He never grumbled or complained. He never criticized his fellow students – an attribute few of them shared with him. In fact, he didn't say much of anything to anyone, probably because nobody wanted to listen to what he had to say. After all, he was The Dropper.

The course of study at The Master's Juggling Academy is rigorous and demanding, and many wondered why The Dropper was still around. He clearly was not keeping up with his classmates. It was something of a mystery why The Dropper's presence was tolerated.

It was almost as if the Juggling Master himself did not notice Josh. Every time Josh dropped a ball or a club, he would slowly chase after it and return to his place, and the Master would not comment. The other students, however, would whisper and point.

Occasionally, a student would deliberately bounce a ball in Josh's direction, in an unnecessary attempt to confuse or distract him. But Josh was The Dropper already, and the other students quickly tired of this game. So, when the other students thought of him at all (which was seldom), they simply wondered why he stayed.

Josh could scarcely manage a reverse cascade. While all the others were working on Backcrosses and Reverse Chops, he was struggling with a Fountain. For some strange reason, he did not go away.

Now, the ultimate juggling pattern taught at the Academy was called Mills Mess. Mastering the intricate series of throws, catches, pauses and exchanges that make up Mills Mess takes tremendous concentration, discipline and skill.

Those students who succeeded in performing it graduated with the title of *Maitre Jongleur*. Those who could not perform it, well, they went on to other things. Everyone knew Josh would never, ever, ever be able to do Mills Mess. He was just a regular mess.

Each morning after breakfast and warm-up exercises, the Master delivered a lecture on a technical topic such as site swap notation. On this particular day, he was explaining braid theory, using Artin's Theorem:

“The braid group B_n is isomorphic to the abstract group generated by the letters b_1, \dots, b_{n-1} that satisfies the braid relation

$$b_i b_{i+1} b_i = b_{i+1} b_i b_{i+1}$$

and far commutativity

$$b_i b_j = b_j b_i \text{ for } |i-j| \geq 2.$$

“Transformations of the braid relation yield the following results:

$$b_i b_{i+1} b_i^{-1} = b_{i+1}^{-1} b_i b_{i+1} \text{ and}$$

$$b_i^{-1} b_{i+1} b_i = b_{i+1} b_i b_{i+1}^{-1}$$

“Are there any questions?”

There were none.

“Good. Now I would like to ask a question in a slightly different topic. What makes a juggler good?”

“Braid theory!” shouted Andrew, with a chuckle. The rest of the room was silent as a dozen aspiring jongleurs sat and thought. Another student raised his hand.

“Practice?” he asked.

“No, it is not practice alone which makes a juggler good,” the Master replied.

“Um, how about speed?” suggested Matt.

“There is more to good juggling than mere speed.”

“The ability to do Mills Mess?” asked Tom.

“No.”

An uncomfortable silence descended upon the group, and in their effort to avoid making eye contact with the Master, several of the students did not notice Josh stand up and walk to the front of the room. Those who did notice nudged their classmates, and quickly all eyes were on him.

He faced the class, three balls in his hands. Drawing a breath, he began to juggle with exquisite, almost painful slowness. First it was just passing one ball back and forth, then two and finally three. His too-slow eyes and two slow hands seemed always on the brink of missing, like a jazz singer who swings beyond the dangerous edge of the beat.

He dropped a ball. No one gasped, and one or two snickered.

His eyes were focused on something far away and his arms continued to move while the dropped ball rolled just beyond reach. Then he stopped and looked at the silent class. The Master walked over to where the ball lay, picked it up and handed it to Josh.

“Is it time?” the Master asked.

“Yes,” replied Josh. “Thank you for the excellent lecture. I will finish the instruction myself.”

“Yes, my Master,” replied the Master.

The Master sat down in the place Josh had previously occupied. The students were puzzled, but the one they had called Master did not speak or explain. He simply looked at the one they had called The Dropper, standing alone at the front of the room.

Casually, Josh picked up five balls and began to juggle in earnest, his previous slowness melted away.

His hands were a blur. The balls seemed attached to invisible strings that pulled in every direction, traveling through a pattern for which the students had no name.

Next, the juggling slowed and Josh's hands barely moved while the balls continued on their infinite journey through space. It was slow, but not like before. There was elegance in his slowness. Perhaps the elegance had always been there, unseen. Perhaps not.

“You think juggling is hard, and it is,” Josh whispered. “But you avoided the truly difficult task of reaching out to a person. You avoided the difficult task of love.

“That is what juggling is really about,” he continued. “That is what everything is really about.”

Troubadours have always been more important and influential than theologians and bishops.

- Brennan Manning,
The Ragamuffin Gospel

The Rest Of God

From Brother Mustard's Little Book of Verse

I want to know the rest of God
The rest of God
The rest of God
I want to know the rest of God
Ba-deedle-deedle-dee

The rest of God is more than all the parts of God I've known.
The rest of God is more than all the parts that He has shown.
The rest of God is peace and joy and movement and repose.
The rest of God is all of Him; I've only seen His toes.

(refrain)

The rest of God is not a nap on clouds 'mid angels bold.
The rest of God is not a stroll on Heaven's streets of gold.
The rest of God is more than just a seat with naught to do.
The rest of God is loving Him, and loving serving you.

(refrain)

The rest of God is all of Him. The rest of God is love.
The rest of God is comforting, and gentle like a dove.
The rest of God is hidden; we've only seen a part.
The rest of God is endless, with no stop or start.

(refrain)

The rest of God's a rainbow, all we've seen is blue.
The rest of God's a footrace, with him and her and you
The rest of God's a banquet, like none you've ever seen.
The rest of God's a mystery, ba-deedle-deedle-deen.

A Brief History Of The Suburban Fathers

“We have reached the time when the family will be called upon to play the part once played by the monastery.”

- G.K. Chesterton, *The New Dark Ages*, 1927

The Suburban Fathers were Christian laymen who lived on the outskirts of urban areas, primarily in North America in the late 20th and early 21st century. The original Suburban Fathers were Christians fleeing the chaos and persecution of that age, seeking to faithfully live out the Gospel mandate. Records from this time indicate they were usually married with 2.6 children. They often lived in cul-de-sac's and drove minivans.

Rejecting the stoic, solitary path of the Desert Fathers from centuries before, the Suburban Fathers dedicated themselves to serve their families and their communities. They believed suburban life would present them with opportunities to lovingly confront worldly values and follow God's call in a deliberate way.

As the lifestyle developed, these believers developed a reputation for holiness and wisdom. In its early form, each one followed more or less an individual spiritual program, perhaps learning some basic practices from other believers, but developing them into their own unique (and sometimes highly idiosyncratic) practice.

The Suburban Fathers believed that “inattention to the holy unravels the fabric of the divine relationship,” in the words of Brennan Manning. Accordingly, they sought to recognize the holy all around them. Over time, they developed a discipline known as “a pause of mystical respect before an ordinary object,” or The Pause for short.

The Pause might be practiced before anything – a chair, a cup, a rock, a shoelace. They would consider the object briefly, and thank God for it. In doing so, they expressed respect for God's wisdom, craftsmanship, creativity and grace, which they recognized in

everything He made. And then they would go about their day, more aware of the holiness around them.

Father Edward the Unhurried came to understand faith by practicing The Pause before a folding chair. One day, as he was about to sit down, a fraction of a second before making contact, he realized how precarious his half-sitting position was, and how ridiculous it would look if the chair were absent. He also realized how completely committed he was to the act of sitting, and how much he trusted the chair to support his weight.

He knew, in that Pause, that if the chair were absent or faulty, he was very likely to get injured. He realized that chairs are parables, metaphors for God, and the act of sitting is an act of faith. And then he sat.

The Suburban Fathers believed that spiritual warfare was little more than the daily walk with Christ, and was not limited to specific prayer modes, times or locations.

In fact, the Fathers taught that spiritual warfare was best waged when believers were entirely unconscious of the battle, and were instead simply focused on loving and serving their neighbor, or were sharing fellowship in laughter or tears, in noise or silence.

Father Chuck of the High Tops struggled to pray, and often realized as he fell asleep at the end of the day, that he had spent no time in prayer at all. Other days he fell asleep without even noticing that much. Father Chuck was a pretty busy guy.

He tried various formulas and methods of prayer, to no avail. Some were too mechanical, others too vague, and all seemed too self-centered.

Yet, he did not despair, trusting that God would be faithful to bring His work to completion. And he accepted the possibility that his prayer life would always be meager.

Then one day, he realized that many of his companions also struggled to pray. And so he decided that each morning as he tied his shoes, poor though he might be at prayer, he would pray a single prayer – that God would bless his companions and give *them* the rich prayer life which he was unable to attain. Some days he would pray for one or two by name, and other days he would pray for everyone in general. Some days, of course, he forgot.

On Sundays, he wore loafers, and simply prayed “Thank You,” as he slipped them onto his feet.

And so, Father Chuck of the High Tops served the community and became a great prayer warrior, without even realizing it. Until the end of his days, he still wished for a richer, deeper prayer life, and strove to commit himself more fully to prayer. And yet, he was content with the work the Holy Spirit was doing in and through him.

There are many more stories which could be told about these servants of Christ, such as Father Jack the Generous or Father Billy the Remarkably Funny. Interested readers may wish to consult *A Complete History of the Suburban Fathers*, if indeed anyone ever writes it.

“The following of Christ is not the achievement or merit of a select few, but the divine command to all Christians without distinction.”

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

Jesus' Basketball Team

One Saturday afternoon, around 2:00, Brother Mustard wandered over to the local community center to shoot some hoops with the kids. He wasn't very fast, and wasn't a very good shot, but he had a decent free-throw and played some tenacious defense. More importantly, he was really good at passing the ball, and everyone liked to have him on their team.

His team lost more games than they won, but not because of him. The other teams were just usually bigger and faster, and that's ok. One day, after playing several games (of which Brother Mustard's team won only two), Brother Mustard took a seat on the bleachers and told this story to the kids who wanted to listen:

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, playing pick-up basketball games in all the courts and synagogues and gymnasiums. And when He saw the crowds wanted to play, He had compassion on them, because they were like players without a coach.

And so He picked his team from the crowd. Those who had always been picked last, He picked first, while those who had always been picked first, He picked last.

He picked a man who was born blind, and the Pharisees scoffed. He picked a man with a withered hand and a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. The Sadducees sneered.

He picked some five year old girls, and then He saw a man named Zaccaeus, who had climbed a sycamore tree to watch the game, because he was very short.

Jesus looked up into the tree and said, "Zaccaeus, come down immediately. I must have you as a point guard on my team today."

So he came down at once and was made to be the point guard.

The Pharisees picked themselves, as usual.

Jesus invited a Samaritan, a leper and a couple prostitutes to be his cheerleaders.

The Pharisees were scandalized.

Then a strange thing happened. Just before the game began, the Pharisees walked off the court, refusing to play. They took their ball and went home, for fear of being mocked.

“For if we win,” they said to themselves, “the people will say it is only because Jesus’ team wasn’t very good. And if we lose, or even if we simply allow too many points, we will look really bad. Besides, we might bump up against a leper and become unclean, and that wouldn’t be cool.”

So the Pharisees went home.

They did not see Jesus give the blind man his sight, or heal the man’s withered hand or the woman’s infirmity or cleanse the lepers. They did not see Him forgive people’s sins, and they missed out on the excellent basketball clinic He offered.

And even if they had stuck around to watch the scrimmage game, they never would have believed that Zaccaeus could do an elevator two-handed double pump dunk, or a 360-degree helicopter one-handed dunk, much less the 180-degree reverse two-handed jam from a lob bounce off the floor. But he did.

Even if they had seen it, they never would have believed it.

And these words appeared to them as nonsense, and they would not believe them.

Luke 24:11

Stones and Rocks In Scripture

He gave Moses the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written by the finger of God. (*Ex 31:18*)

Now the Lord said to Moses “Cut out for yourself two stone tablets like the former ones...” (*Ex 34:1*)

You shall not make for yourselves idols, nor shall you set up for yourselves an image or a sacred pillar, nor shall you place a figured stone in your land to bow down to it; for I am the Lord your God. (*Lev 26:1*)

“Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it that the people may drink.” (*Ex 17:6*)

“I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.” (*Matt 3:9b*)

And the tempter came and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.” (*Matt 4:3*)

“Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone?” (*Matt 7:9*)

And he [David] took his stick into his hand and chose for himself five smooth stones from the book... and he approached the Philistine. (*1 Sam 17:40*)

But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, “He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” (*John 8:7*)

And they went on stoning Stephen as he called upon the Lord and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” (*Acts 7:59*)

And He answered and said, “I tell you, if these become silent, the stones will cry out!” (*Luke 19:40*)

Jesus said, “Remove the stone.” (*John 11:39*)

An angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. (*Matt 28:2*)

The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief corner stone. (*Pss 118:22*)

And coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected by men, but choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (*1 Pet 2:4-5*)

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.” (*Ez 36:26*)

“I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.” (*Rev 2:17*)

Jesus looked at him, and said, “You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter). (*John 1:42*)

“Therefore, everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock.” (*Matt 7:24*)

Job At Five

An excerpt from “The Collected Stories of Brother Mustard”

There was a boy in Mrs. Abishag’s kindergarten class at Uz Elementary School whose name was Job, and that boy was a good boy. He used his inside voice when he was inside, he shared his toys, drank his milk and was obedient to his teacher. He did not hit people.

His toys included 100 blocks, 100 crayons of many colors, 100 little cars and very many books.

He and his friends used to play together every day. After the playtime was over and the toys put away, Job would return to the play area and make sure it was clean, for Job said “perhaps my friends have left some toys out, by accident, and I will pick up after them and put the toys away.”

Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them.

And the Lord said to Satan, “Have you seen my boy Job? There are no other kids like him. He uses his inside voice when he is inside, he shares his toys, drinks his milk and is obedient to his teacher. He does not hit people.”

Then Satan answered the Lord, “You have made it too easy for him. You have blessed the work of his hands and given him lots of nice toys. But if you take them away, he will not be such a good kid anymore.”

Then the Lord said to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not give him any ouchies.”

Now it happened that Job had built a very tall tower from his 100 blocks, and a strong wind came up and knocked the tower down. Then his little sister took his blocks to the outhouse and she did throw them into the hole, from which they could not be retrieved.

Some other kids came over and broke all his crayons. Then his daddy did accidentally drive the family wagon over Job's toy cars, which had been left in the driveway by Job's friends.

Then, Job's mommy told him his best friend in the whole world, Elihu, was moving with his family to another village two miles away and Job would not be able to play with him every day anymore.

So Job cried for a moment, then wiped his face, blew his nose, and stood up.

"I didn't have any toys when I was born, and when I grow up I will leave my toys behind. There is no reason only good things should happen. Bad things happen too, but I know God is love." And in all this, Job did not sin.

Then Satan said to the Lord, "It is because you spare his flesh that he remains faithful."

And so the Lord said, "You may give him an ouchie, or a virus or a cold or something, but do not kill him, for he is just a child."

And it came to pass that Job's entire body was covered with red spots, and they itched exceedingly and his mommy told him not to scratch them, for they were the chicken pox.

So Job had to stay in bed for a whole week, and drink yucky medicine and try to not scratch the itchy red spots. His mommy put lotion on them, but it did not help much. And still Job did not despair or lose faith in God.

Then God told Satan, "That is enough. Leave the boy alone."

Satan replied, "OK, I'll stop for now, but I'm not done with this kid."

"Neither am I," answered the Lord. "Neither am I."

And lo, the red spots left Job's body and he was able to go outside and play again, for he was no longer itchy nor contagious. And his daddy carved him a new set of blocks to replace the set his sister had thrown into the outhouse, and these new blocks were nicer than before, and there were 300 of them. Job built many tall towers. And three new families moved into town from the land of the Temanites, Shuhites and Naamathites, one family from each of those lands, and each family had a son Job's age. And so, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar played with Job every day.

Job grew up to be a man who was blameless, upright, fearing God, and turning away from evil. Seven sons and three daughters were born to him. His possessions were many, and he was the greatest of all the men of the east.

And God blessed him.

A Prayer For Rain

Bless the rain, oh God,
which falls with such abandon.

Bless the rain,
which gives us life.

Bless the rain,
and let even the smallest drop
not fear the thunder,
nor tremble at the thought of arriving
with a splash
on the ground.

Amen

The Way of the Sandwich *A Brother Mustard Story*

One day, as the noon meal was about to begin, Brother Mustard taught the monks, saying:

“My brothers, have you considered the way of the sandwich? For behold, the sandwich is not one ingredient, but many.

“If the bread shall say, “Because I am not the meat, I am not part of the sandwich, is it therefore not part of the sandwich? Of course not.

“And if the cheese shall say “Because I am not the lettuce, I am not of the sandwich, is it therefore not of the sandwich? May it never be!

“If the whole sandwich were the bread, where were the flavors and crunchy juiciness? If the whole sandwich were the lettuce, where were the sandwich? Nay, if the whole sandwich were the lettuce, it would be the salad, not the sandwich.

“I tell you the truth. From the beginning of time hath the Sandwich Maker set the ingredients, every one of them, in the sandwich, as it hath pleased Him and His taste.

“And the meat cannot say unto the bread, I have no need of thee; nor again, the cheese to the lettuce, I have no need of thee.

“Nay, much more those ingredients which seem more feeble, are the more necessary.

“And those ingredients which we think to be less important, such as the mustard, upon these we bestow more abundant honor, as they – though they be included in the smallest quantities – add great flavor to the entire sandwich and keep it from being too dry.

And when Brother Mustard was finished speaking, he sat down and ate his sandwich. It was a delicious sandwich, with the meat sliced very thin. It had lettuce and cheese and mustard. He even had a few chips to go with it, and a pickle.

And he saw that it was very good.

The Gospel of grace is brutally devalued when Christians maintain that the transcendent God can only be properly honored and respected by denying the goodness and the truth and the beauty of the things of this world.

- Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*

Tax Collectors And Prostitutes

We often implicitly and mistakenly assume that Jesus hung out with *former* tax collectors and *reformed* prostitutes. Don't feel bad if that's the conclusion you subconsciously drew or the impression you got from reading the Gospels. Christ has a wonderful tendency to reform and remake people, so it's a reasonable perspective to take.

Human beings tend to be different after encountering Jesus. It is natural to assume the tax collectors and prostitutes Christ hung out with had abandoned their former sins and all had new, respectable professions. That was certainly the case with the Apostle Matthew, as far as we can tell. He even became an evangelist. But perhaps Matthew was an exception.

See, the Pharisees were pretty upset about the company Jesus kept. I think they were upset because He was hanging out with the unreformed. These are *actual* tax collectors we're talking about, not *former* collectors. People who had collected money that very afternoon and then gone on to have dinner with Jesus. Scandalous!

And the hookers! Unbelievable! There is a very good chance some of these women – maybe most of them, perhaps even all of them – were still engaged in their trade. I highly doubt they all got married or became school teachers first, then went and had dinner with Jesus. Nope. He really did hang out with hookers. It drove the Pharisees nuts.

The Pharisees asked “Why is your Teacher eating with the tax-gatherers and sinners?” He did not answer by saying “These former sinners have renounced their ways – there are no tax collectors or prostitutes here.” Instead, Jesus talked about having compassion for the sick. He told the woman who wept over his feet that her faith had saved her. He told her to go in peace, and not because she was now perfect.

Meeting Christ is always a transformative event, but the transformation does not always occur in a flash. That is, it does not

always occur on human timelines, or according to our preferences, priorities or schedule. Sometimes, it takes a lifetime.

That still drives the Pharisees nuts. But the wise, the compassionate, the loving and the gentle are willing to trust in the Lord's transformative timing, even when the Prostitute or Tax Collector is us.

God, it appears, is not in as much of a hurry as we are.

The Street Sweeper King

Variations On A Theme

Variation 1

On a crisp October morning, His Royal Highness King Reginald the Wise and Compassionate, Defender of the Realm and Sovereign of the Seven Isles, Champion of the Battle of Istervar and Lord High King over all, got an idea.

He stepped down off his throne, removing his ermine cape. He folded it carefully and set it near his footstool. Next, he took off his mighty silver crown which bore the four Great Pearls of Trimna, and gently placed it on top of his folded cape.

From his left hand, he removed the Royal Signet Ring, upon which was carved the Great Seal of the Empire. From his right hand, he removed a ring which bore the Eye of Loparis, a brilliant and enormous diamond without a flaw, the pride of the kingdom.

His sword, the unbreakable Sun Blade, he set aside. In its place, he took up a broom.

There was nothing remarkable about the broom, aside from the hands it was held in. The broom was not new, nor clean, and was even missing a few patches of bristles here and there. It had not belonged to the king's mother or to his beloved childhood nurse, nor was it a gift from a wiseman. It wasn't even old enough to have much character. It was simply the broom he chose that day.

So, with a broom in his unjeweled hands, King Reginald walked the full length of his throne room, to the massive double doors at the far end. They were opened, and he stepped through into the courtyard.

Still holding the broom, King Reginald began to run. He ran past his Royal Stables, and shouted "Hey-ho!" in response to the excited whinny of his steed Red Bear. Past the armory he ran, gathering speed, until he finally arrived at the castle's front gates. At

his signal, the drawbridge was lowered and King Reginald sprinted across, aiming straight for the center of town.

He stopped running when he arrived in the middle of Main Street, where the bakery faced the shoemaker's shop. The gutters were filled with the detritus of many days, and in the middle of the street was evidence of the countless horses which had passed that way.

King Reginald got to work at once. Gripping the broom in his powerful arms, he swept and swept, scarcely pausing. His massive shoulders pushed the broom, sweeping away crusts of bread, abandoned shoes, and manure piles, along with unrecognizable lumps of who-knows-what.

The wind blew hard on this crisp October day, and the King was cold, despite his exertions. Still, he swept, cleaning the streets for his people.

All day he swept, until it was night. No one noticed, no one cheered. He came back the next day and swept some more. There was a lot of sweeping to do.

The Street Sweeper King

Variation 2

Colleen was six years old when the fever took her parents. Her mother got sick first, and lingered for a few days while Colleen's father watched helplessly. The day after his wife's death, he got the fever too, and was dead by morning.

Her father had been a chimney sweep, and her mother took in laundry. Now that her parents were gone, Colleen tried to wash clothes too, but the wet clothes were so heavy and she was so small. Sweeping chimneys was out of the question, even if someone had been around to teach her how.

She looked for other work, but there was precious little that could be done by such a small girl. Eventually, she managed to get a job as a street sweeper, pushing a broom that was taller than herself and trying to keep a few blocks of cobblestone free of trash and manure.

Passersby sometimes gave her a coin, but she was hungry all the time. Still, sweeping the street was the one thing she could do, so she did it.

She wasn't very good at being a street sweeper. The broom was so big, the street was so long, and she was so small. The horse manure was sticky and heavy, and drivers seldom slowed down as they approached her. She spent almost as much time running for the curb to avoid being trampled as she did actually sweeping.

Nights were cold in the city, and Colleen had no place to go. Sometimes the other street urchins would chase her or throw things at her, but usually they left her alone. Most people left her alone.

One day, Colleen heard a sound like thunder coming along the road, and she knew a fast horse was approaching. She ran for the curb, dragging her broom behind herself, and reached a safe spot just in time.

Turning around, she saw an enormous horse, with eyes that shone like the sun. The rider was dressed in white, and had a crown of

gold upon his head. As he came alongside Colleen, he pulled up on the reins and the horse stopped.

“Colleen,” the rider said, in a voice like the wind, “Do you know who I am?”

“No, m’lord,” she replied with a curtsy, eyes lowered.

“I am called the Great King, the King of Kings, and all this land is mine.” He dismounted and walked over to her. “I come with a gift for you, dear Colleen. A gift, and a great responsibility.”

Colleen was too tired, cold and hungry to feel afraid. At the mention of a gift, she looked up, hoping to see a coin, a blanket or a crust of bread in the Great King’s hands. She sighed when she saw his outstretched hands were empty, but noticed strange scars on each palm.

“Colleen, my child” the King said, “Be not afraid.” He sat on the ground next to her, unconcerned about the dirt. Colleen sat down next to him.

“I have come to make you a king.”

Colleen laughed. “A king? How can I be a king? I am so little, and I’m a girl, and I’m poor and very dirty. Forgive me for laughing, m’lord, but I could never...”

The King interrupted, “I will *not* forgive you for laughing, Colleen, because your laughter needs no forgiveness. Making you a king *is* funny,” he said with a chuckle, “And you should laugh. But making you a king is also serious, and is precisely what I intend to do.” He stood.

“Rise, King Colleen. You shall be called King Colleen the Kind and King Colleen the Brave, and in my name you will rule. You shall lead this realm with grace and beauty. Your reign will be joyful and peaceful, and I will bless your nation with every blessing, for I am the Great King.

“You will be a sign and symbol to all of my grace and my love for my people. Come, child-king. Let us ride to the castle, where you will be made clean and given a white robe and a crown.

“Come, let us celebrate the coronation of the Streetsweeper King.”

The greatest honor we can give Almighty God is to live gladly because of the knowledge of His love.

- Julian of Norwich

The Break Master

Part III

There's one more thing to say about the Break Master. One more very important thing, which like most important things is one thing and many things at once. It's the only thing left to say, and it's already more than I know. Here it is:

He is not merely the Break Master.

Being the Break Master is only a part of Him – perhaps His left pinkie (and yet his entire character is there as well). Being the Break Master – the Giver of Breaks, the Master of Breaks – is a small, even temporary piece of His character, although I do not know what the words small or temporary mean when applied to Him.

I don't even know what the title Break Master means, when applied to Him.

I do know that He is more fully known as the Healer, the Completer, the Unifier and Redeemer.

He is a Gentle Breaker, because He is so much more than a Breaker. Other gods from other places get names like Destroyer of Worlds, but not Him. He is the Destroyer of Other Gods. He is the smasher of the idols within.

He is the Breaker of Brokenness. His Breaking is for the purpose of Wholeness.

He is the Whole Master, and is only the Break Master to those who have not yet opened the door to His gentle knocking.

And he is the Break Master to those who have opened the door.

He is indeed the Break Master.

And he is coming.

I don't know what this means, so please don't ask.

Just listen for the knock.

Come, let us return to the Lord.

For He has torn us, but He will heal us;

He has wounded us, but He will bandage us.

He will revive us after two days;

He will raise up up on the third day that we may live before Him.

- Hos 6:12

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